

## **I could go anywhere with you** by Jancys-Blue-Bayou

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**Summary:** Nancy and Jonathan in their senior year go on an impromptu road trip.

## 1. Gone to look for America

A/N: From a prompt by the lovely and talented rhoeysama on Tumblr: "Jancy weekend getaway. One of them has a surprise/secret."

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She's just about had it with everything when she crosses the parking lot on her lunch break. Study-wise senior year has been going good, great even. She just heard back from Columbia last week. She was in. She was beyond excited about that. But she was so damn tired of Hawkins. She was tired of still seeing "SLUT" etched on her locker or hearing the same sentiment whispered in the hall. She was tired of sleazy guys coming with gross propositions. She was tired of her parents either fighting or not speaking to each other at all. She was just tired of being in this tiny claustrophobic town.

But then there's him, he's sitting on the hood of his car and looks at her with that small crooked smile that she knows is just for her. She can't help but smile at him, but only for a second. He's the absolute best thing about this town and when they're together everything else seemed to melt away. But in the back of her mind she worried that their time together might be limited. Not that they'd ever break up. At least she knew she couldn't do that, distance be damned.

"Hey," she greets and pecks his lips.

"Hey, you okay?" He asks as she settles next to him on the hood and gets out her lunch.

She sighs and unwraps her sandwich.

"I'm just tired of everyone in there," she nods at the school building, "and everyone at home and of the whole damn town. Sometimes I feel like I just want to get away."

"I understand," he answers and she knows that he genuinely does. "I feel that way too," he adds.

She nods and they eat in silence for a minute.

"Do you want to get out of here?" He suddenly asks.

"You mean skip?" She asks. A tempting idea. It's Friday, only a couple of classes left and none of them that important.

"Yeah. And just go. Out of town, I mean. For the weekend. If you want?"

She looks at him, surprised. Now that's a tempting idea.

"Yes."

She leans over and kisses him. Jumping of the hood they get inside his car, finishing their sandwiches on the drive to his house. No reason to waste time.

"You're okay with leaving Will and your mom?" She asks cautiously.

"Will's gonna be at a sleepover at your place all weekend. And mom will be fine."

"Alright."

She follows him inside as he throws some clothes and mix tapes into a bag and leaves a note for his mom before they go to her house.

Her mom is home so they try to be quiet and sneak in. They make it upstairs without a hitch where she quickly packs a bag and grab all her savings to use as gas money but on their way out her mother hears them and appears in the doorway from the kitchen. Glass of wine in her hand as usual, even though it's just barely past noon.

"Nancy? Jonathan! What are you doing here?"

"Uh, half-day at school mom, didn't I mention? Teachers conference," she lies quickly and effortlessly.

"Oh. Where are you going?" Her mother asks, spying the bag in her hand.

"It's Allie's birthday and she wanted to celebrate with another girls night for old times sake y'know? So slumber party and all. I'll

probably be back on Sunday," she continues to spin the yarn.

"I'm giving her a ride over there before I start my shift," Jonathan quickly tacks on.

"Oh, okay. Well, wish Allie a happy birthday from me then."

"Will do!"

"Nice to see you, Jonathan."

"You too, Mrs. Wheeler."

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"Maybe you've been spending too much time with me. You're becoming too good at lying," she jokes as he starts the car.

"Could never spend too much time with you."

"Same," she smiles shyly at him.

Jonathan puts in a mix tape and The Kinks stream out at a low volume.

"Where to?" He asks.

"I don't know," she realizes. "Any ideas?"

"No."

They both burst out laughing.

"Let's just drive," she decides.

"Any particular direction?"

"Hang on," she starts and digs out a coin. "Heads mean we go vertical, tails mean horizontal," she says before flipping it. "Tails, so horizontal it is. Okay, now heads is east, tails is west," she decides before flipping the coin again. "Heads. So, let's go east?"

"Sure."

"We'll stop where we want to."

He nods.

"Going to see Murray was the first time I was out of state," he says almost like a confession. She just shrugs.

"I've been to Chicago, Niagara Falls, Mount Rushmore and the Grand Canyon. And to our aunt in Minnesota. Mostly remember fighting with Mike in the back of the car though."

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They get on the interstate and just head east with no particular destination in mind. They're not even out of Indiana before she kicks off her Converse and puts her feet up on the dashboard.

"This was a great idea."

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They've just crossed into Ohio when they make their first stop, at a service station on the outskirts of some small town in the middle of nowhere. The car needs gas and she needs to pee. Walking out of the bathroom and meeting Jonathan by the counter where he's paying for the gas she asks the old man behind the counter if they could possibly look at a roadmap. He digs out an old one from the seventies and gives it to her for a nickel.

"Where are you kids headed?"

"Don't know yet."

"Seeing where the wind takes you, eh? I like that."

"Yeah. Thanks for this, have a nice day!"

"You too!"

They get back inside the car and he pulls out of the gas station. She studies the map.

"Okay so we're here... it's not that far to Dayton actually, but I figure we just keep following the interstate for awhile, if you're not

desperate to see Dayton?"

"I am not, no."

"Alright, then just follow the signs leading to Columbus."

"You want to see Columbus?"

"I don't think so but it's in the right direction."

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"Heroes, Space Oddity, Cat People, Changes and Let's Dance," she lists off.

"What? You can't possibly have Let's Dance in your top five Bowie songs?!" He protests.

"Why not?"

"Ahead of Starman? Or Life On Mars? Or Ashes to Ashes? Or Station to Station? Or Rebel Rebel? Or The Man Who Sold the World? Or Sound and Vision? Or-"

"Yes," she interrupts.

"But it's just so... I'm not saying it's not a good song but ugh, it's so annoying that everybody knows that song but ignore all the good stuff from before."

"You're just being pretentious," she teases.

"You're a slave to the pop charts," he retaliates.

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"So how are you liking Ohio?" She asks.

"I don't know, feels kind of the same as Indiana."

"I agree. Wanna check out Pennsylvania instead?"

"Sure," he answers and blows through Columbus while America by Simon and Garfunkel plays on the latest mix tape he put in.

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They follow I-70 and cut through northern West Virginia before crossing into Pennsylvania, stopping at a diner outside of Pittsburgh in the evening. They settle in a booth in the half-empty diner and order two cheeseburgers.

"Thanks. Do you know any cheap motels around here?" She ask the waitress when they get their food.

"There's one a couple of miles further down the road. Where are you kids headed?"

"Nowhere in particular."

"Huh. Been driving long?"

"From Indiana."

"Long way from home. Well, enjoy your meal."

"Thanks."

"So, Pittsburgh," she begins, taking a bite of her burger. "Steel City."

"Birthplace of Andy Warhol."

"Is it?"

"Yeah."

"Cool. Weird place to end up but I figure we sleep here tonight and tomorrow we can go... where do you want to go?"

"Wherever you want to go."

"What do you say we head for the border?" She suggests, taking out the roadmap and putting it down on the table. Tracing the map with a french fry she continues. "See the Niagara Falls or something. I was just six when we went there but I remember it was beautiful. But it's just over 200 miles from here to Buffalo. What do you think?"

"Love it. Picturesque."

"Yeah."

After eating in silence for a minute Jonathan pipes up.

"I have something to tell you."

"What?"

He puts down his burger and fiddles with his hands. She think she can read him pretty good by now. It doesn't seem as much nervousness as excitement.

"I got in to NYU. Full scholarship."

"You got in?!" Her voice gets so loud other customers turn their heads. "That's amazing!" She leans over and kisses him, almost knocking over her Coke in the process. She then quickly gets out of her booth and throws herself down next to him in his and lock her arms around his neck and her eyes with his.

"You've just been sitting on that the whole day?!"

"I found out yesterday, I was going to tell you at lunch but you were having a rough day and needed to get out of town, so."

"You're unbelievable," she shakes her head. "I'm so proud of you! Full scholarship?"

"Yeah, they loved my portfolio."

"I love you. We'll be in the same city!"

"Yeah."

"We'll be able to see each other all the time... we can share an apartment!"

"Do you want to?" He asks cautiously.

"Do you want to?" She challenges.

"Yes," they answer at the same time. She kisses him again.

"We should go to New York now!"



"We don't have enough gas or money," he notes, bringing her back down to earth.

"Yeah, you're right," she admits. Then whispers in his ear: "Let's go to the motel instead."

Jonathan gives her *that* look. She drags him out of the booth and waves to the waitress while Jonathan throws down some crumpled bills on the table before grabbing her hand as they make their way out the door.

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"Do you want a single or a double?" The tired lady at the front desk asks without looking up from her crossword puzzle.

"Single," they answer at the same time.

"Deja vu," she remarks as they walk down the corridor to their room.

As soon as they get inside the room they're all over each other. She's not proud of the little whimper she let's out as his lips crash into hers and his arms go around her back, pressing her closer to him, but she also can't help it. And she definitely can't help the noise she makes when he picks her up, enabling her to hook her legs around his waist as he carries her to the bed.

"I love you," she says and removes her shirt before kissing him again. She loves everything about him. She loves him on top of her right now, she loves him under her at other times. She loves being with him in Hawkins, she loves being with in this crummy motel room. She loves the idea of being with him in New York.

"I love you," he reciprocates the sentiment and repeats it over and over as his kisses move from her lips down to her neck and then down and down and down and *oh*.

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"Good morning", she yawns as she wakes up in his arms.

"Very," he answers.

She untangles herself from him slightly to stretch out. Her body was a

bit sore from last night. The best kind of sore.

"Still wanna go to the Niagara Falls?" He asks.

"Yeah. Do you?"

"Yeah."

"We should probably get a move on then."

She sits up and scoots to the edge of the bed. Spotting his t-shirt from last night that apparently landed here after she threw it off him, she pulls it over her head and stands up. It's completely oversized on her of course, reaching almost to her knees. She goes to the window and moves the curtains.

"Lovely view," she notes as she looks out at the back of the motel and the brick wall of the rundown building next to it.

"Yeah," he answers from the bed. The sound of a shutter makes her turn her head around and catch him lowering his camera.

"Jonathan," she whines but not seriously. She knows it's a photo for their eyes only. "Get up."

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"What do you think?" She asks him when he finally walks up next to her and takes her hand after walking a few steps back and snapping photographs of her and the waterfalls. She loves that he loves taking her picture.

"Beautiful."

"Yeah. I like it more this time around. I kind of wanna see everything with you."

He presses a kiss to her temple.

"So, have you used up your roll already?" She asks.

"Not quite," he answers.

"Good. Give it to me," she turns and faces him, beckoning for his camera.

"Why?"

"Just give it. I want one with you in it too."

He hands it over and she takes the camera in one hand and his hand again in the other. She walks over to the family of four that's been standing off to their right admiring the falls.

"Hi, excuse me, but would you mind taking our picture?" She asks.

"Of course," the man who looks to be in his forties answers while his wife smiles and tries to keep watch over their little kids.

She gives him Jonathan's camera. Jonathan smiles shyly and puts an arm around her as she leans into him and the friendly man takes their photo with the majestic waterfalls in the background.

"Thanks."

"No problem. Actually, would you mind taking our picture aswell?" The man asks and takes out his own camera after he's given back Jonathan's.

"Sure," Jonathan answers and snaps off several in a quick succession of the family posing happily.

"Thanks."

"You're a cute couple, where are you from?" The wife asks.

"Indiana," she answers.

"Wow, long way from home then. We just made the trip up for the day, from New York."

"We're headed there this fall," she smiles. "For college."

"Oh how fun! Both of you? What will you be studying?"

"Journalism at Columbia. And he just got a scholarship to NYU, for

photography."

"Wow, how lucky were we to get our picture taken by you then!"

She nods giddily in agreement while Jonathan just shyly mumbles an answer. They say goodbye to the nice family and heads back to the car.

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They drive back along the coast of Lake Erie. Stopping in the town of Erie for food she then dares him to go skinny dipping with her out on Presque Isle. The water's freezing since it's only spring. She playfully pouts when he teases her for darting out of the water first. She steals another of his t-shirts and smiles contently when he wraps his flannel around her aswell when they're back in the car to warm up.

They find another cheap motel for the night before continuing the journey back home on Sunday.

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"We should go west in the summer," she suggests as they pass the border back into Indiana.

"I've never seen the ocean," he nods.

"Me neither."

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It's evening by the time he pulls up to the curb outside her house.

"Thank you for this."

"It-"

"Was your idea and it was awesome. I could go anywhere with you, even just a crummy motel room in a town as useless as this one."

"I love you."

"Love you too."

"Pick you up tomorrow?"

"Yes please."

## 2. Go west, life is peaceful there

Two weeks after graduation they decide to go west. His mom is fine with them going. Her parents... were not so thrilled but they couldn't really say anything, school was out and she would soon move out so there wasn't really a lot they could hold over her head. She can't wait. Hawkins is boring, Jonathan is fun and the world is big and theirs to explore.

They packed their bags and stuffed them into the car on Sunday evening, getting up at 6 am on Monday morning so they could head out early. She stayed the night at the Byers as she did most nights now, Joyce had long been fine with it and helped her convince her mom too that it was fine after she'd got caught sneaking back into her house at dawn back in March.

After a quick breakfast they get in his car. She can barely keep her eyes open while he navigates the familiar streets out of Hawkins. He snickers a little when she lets out a comically large yawn.

"Shut up," she says and throws a lazy punch at his arm.

"You're really not a morning person," he says. He'd been the one to rouse her this morning. And most mornings. If not for the prospect of being out of Indiana before 9 am she'd never gotten up.

"This is frankly an ungodly hour," she grumbles. "And I've barely had any coffee."

"You had three cups before we left," he notes.

"Well they didn't quite take, then."

"You can sleep for a while if you want," he says as he pulls onto the interstate.

"Good idea."

She curls up on the bench seat, folding up a sweater as a make-shift pillow against the window and grabs some shuteye. Jonathan pops in a tape he made for her, filled with stuff like Fleetwood Mac and

Simon & Garfunkel since he figures it's the softest tape he's got in the car and therefore easiest to fall asleep to. He's proven right as her cute light little snores are soon heard.

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"Where are we?" She asks when she wakes up, stretching her body as best she can in the car.

"Illinois," he informs her.

"Nice. That was a good nap."

"I could tell."

"How?"

"You only snore when you're really sound asleep."

"I do not snore!"

"Yes you do, we've been over this before."

"I don't."

"Yes you do. Just a little, it's cute."

"I don't snore," she keeps insisting.

"It's really light. It doesn't even wake me up."

She huffs.

"Where are we exactly?" She asks, picking up one of her roadmaps.

"Just passed Effingham."

"We've made good time then," she notes.

"Yeah, not a lot of people out on the roads yet."

"So we should be well into Missouri by noon."

"Yep."

"I know how we can pass the time!"

"How?"

"I've put together a little trivia quiz for each state we'll pass through!"

"... you really have too much time on your hands now that school's out."

"Shut up, Thumper. If you do well you'll get a prize."

"What's the prize?"

"Uh-uh, that's a surprise."

"What kind of surprise?"

"The kind of surprise I think it's best to save for when you're not driving..."

"Oh. I'm in."

"Of course you are. Okay, first question on Illinois then: Why is it called Illinois?"

"Uh... isn't it just one of those where the name comes from some Native tribe that lived here before the colonizers came and slaughtered everyone?"

"Hm, well you're in the ballpark. It comes from French missionaries wrong interpretation of the word 'iliniwek' in the native language. They thought it meant man or tribe of superior men, but it's actually a verb meaning 'speak the regular way'."

"Did you go to the library to research this?" He has to ask.

"Just a little. Next question: What's the state motto?"

"State Sovereignty, National Union."

"Correct!" She sounds impressed and pleased.

"It said it on a sign when I crossed the state line," he admits.



"Crap, I forgot about that."

"That motto sucks, by the way."

"Yeah it's not the most fun. Question three: Two men held offices in Illinois prior to becoming President of the United States, they are?"

"Lincoln."

"Correct, and?"

"Some old guy with a beard?"

"Ulysses S. Grant."

"So I was right."

"Not good enough."

"Isn't trivia questions supposed to be fun?"

"Shut up, here's a fun question. It's in three parts."

"Oh God."

"Which author of detective novels was born in Illinois?"

"Uh, I don't know, Raymond Chandler?" He takes a shot.

"Yes! And what's the name of his detective character?"

"Marlowe."

"Right! And who played the character on screen?"

"Oh, the guy, um, the guy from Casablanca. My mom loves him."

"Humphrey Bogart. Okay, you did well on that one. Last question is about music."

"Finally."

"Which band from Illinois had a number one hit with this song?"

Nancy asks, turns down the volume on the mix tape and begins humming what he guesses is supposed to be a tune.

"Trick question," he says when she quiets after thirty seconds of incoherent humming. "There's no way that's a song."

"Yes it is! Shut up. Fine I'll sing it so you'll get it: If you leave me now, you take away the biggest part of me oh-"

"Nancy. Don't ever do that again. Chicago is not allowed in this car in any way shape or form," he says seriously.

"Snob," she says and hits him on the arm.

"Well I thought I did pretty good."

"Eh, B minus. No, actually a C just for your snobbish musical taste. Hope you'll do better on Missouri."

He rolls his eyes but smirks.

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"Three famous authors were born in Missouri," she asks after they've passed St. Louis.

"Okay."

"Name them, please."

"Oh! Uh... Mark Twain?"

"Yes!"

"You're gonna have to give me a hint at least on the others."

"One was a great modernist poet..."

"Okay."

"Known by his initials and surname..."

"T.S. Eliot."

"Right! And the last one was one of our greatest playwrights. He died two years ago."

"Arthur Miller?"

"Is still alive. And from New York."

"Ah."

"This guy shared his name with another state."

"Oh, Tennessee Williams. Was he really named Tennessee?"

"No, he was really called-"

"Will we be stopping anytime soon? I have to take a leak," a new voice suddenly asks from the backseat, scaring the living hell out of them. She screams out loud and Jonathan swerves the car for a second. It's Max who's popped her head up in the backseat where she's apparently been lying under a couple of blankets they always keep there. Another head pops up from the floor of the backseat. Lucas.

"What the hell are you doing here?!" She shouts at them, turning around.

"Hitching a ride," Max says like it's just a casual thing.

"What?!" She shouts again, incredulous.

Jonathan pulls off to the side of the road and turns round as well. They stare at the 14 year olds in the backseat.

"You're heading for the Pacific, we want to go to Los Angeles, so we thought we could tag along," Lucas explains.

"What?! Why? What's in Los Angeles?"

"My dad," Max says.

She quiets for a second, processing that.

"But this is... you can't just... do this."

"I'm assuming your parents don't know about this?" Jonathan asks.

"No..." Lucas admits.

"We're turning around," she says.

"It's four hours back to Hawkins..." Max notes.

Damnit. The cunning bastards planned this, to lay hidden until they'd driven far enough for it to be a huge hassle to turn back. The whole day will be wasted. She's both mad and impressed. How the hell did they manage to be quiet and still for four hours? Maybe they fell asleep too. She sighs and looks to Jonathan who looks equally annoyed and unhappy about the prospect of driving four hours back to drop off their sneaky hitchhikers.

"Okay. Explain it to me again. You guys want to see your dad?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I want to? I haven't seen him for like almost two years. I was supposed to see him for Thanksgiving but he had to work. I talked to him last week, he said he'd love to see me but he couldn't afford the plane ticket. I asked mom but she said no. So when we heard you guys were heading there, we just thought we could tag along."

"Come on, we won't bother you guys, we just want to get to Los Angeles. We can pay for ourselves and everything, I've got all my birthday money and money from lawn-mowing with me," Lucas butts in and shows a good amount of cash.

"Yeah and I busted open the Ms. Pacman machine at the arcade, look at this," Max says and shows off a bag filled with quarters. "Plus I stole a twenty from Billy," she adds and pulls out a bill.

"You stole money?" She raises an eyebrow at the girl.

"From my asshole step-brother and from an arcade machine. Victimless crimes."

"Uh, someone still owns the arcade," Jonathan notes.

"They'll just blame it on that loser Keith who works there," Max notes.

"Yeah and he's a douchebag. Plus he's creeping on Nancy," Lucas adds, foregoing to mention that he at one point had used the possibility of a date with Nancy to entice Keith.

Jonathan looks to her.

"Ew," she mutters and shakes her head. "Whatever. And you're just along for the ride?" She asks Lucas.

"Yeah," he shrugs.

"I want him to meet my dad. He's the only family member I've got who's cool," Max says. "Please, can we go? I miss him. My mom's boring and I hate my step-dad and Billy. I just want to see him," Max pleads in a tone she's never heard her use before.

She sighs and looks to Jonathan again. He shrugs. What the hell. She's not exactly in a position to take the high ground regarding running off and not telling your parents. Plus she can't imagine having to live under the same roof as that psycho Billy Hargrove and Mr. Hargrove who apparently is as bad.

"Fine. But at the next stop we're finding a payphone and you're both calling your parents."

"Okay. Thanks."

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They pull over at a rest stop in Stanton. Max goes directly to the restroom so she forces Lucas to begin calling home while Jonathan fills the tank.

"Hey Mom... where I am? Okay, don't freak out but I'm in Missouri... I said don't freak out! Can you... can you just... well I can explain if you just... can I explain? Thanks. Me and Max are going to Los Angeles to see her dad... because she wants to see him! ... I said, because she wants to see him, come on you know how much she hates... no we're not hitchhiking! We tagged along with Jonathan

and Nancy they were road tripping out west anyway... please stop shouting? ... well I'm sorry I didn't tell you but... no way we're not turning back... because she wants to see her dad! And I'm going with her... I am responsible! Mom I'm 14! I... I do have money! ... my money... no I'm never changing my mind... never, I'm going with her... yes... yes... yes I'm careful... I... what? Oh, okay, hang on."

"She wants to speak to you," Lucas says and holds out the receiver to her.

"Hello, Mrs. Sinclair... yes I... well I just want to say for the record that this wasn't Jonathan's or my idea, we were going alone, they hid in the car and didn't make their presence known until halfway through Missouri... well yes I understand completely but can I just say that in spite of this I do think Lucas and Max are both pretty mature for their age, and of course we'll look after them... yes, I know, I'm not happy with the way they did this either but, she just wants to see her dad you know, I think that's... it's not like they're running away to do something crazy or dangerous they just want to see her dad... me and Jonathan? Oh we've just always wanted to see the ocean, we like traveling, see stuff... yeah definitely, we weren't planning on doing anything crazy anyway I mean you know me... yes... yes, exactly... yes I promise, we'll look after them, you have my word on that... yes... thank you... well, have a nice day and we'll see you in a couple of days... bye."

"Well?" Lucas asks when she's hung up.

"You're so goddamn lucky that she's your mom," she informs him while Jonathan joins them and Max comes out of the restroom so it's her turn.

"Hi mom... on my way to see dad... because I want to! ... well you wouldn't let me so I had to do it like this... no I'm not hitching, me and Lucas got a ride with Jonathan and Nancy... Byers and Wheeler... Will's big brother and Mike's big sister... they're 18... well I had to since you wouldn't... no I'm not going back! We're already in Missouri and you can't stop me from seeing him... I don't care! ... because I love him and I miss him and I hate it at home with *Neil* and Billy... I do! ... don't tell me how to feel?! They don't care about me and they don't like Lucas and they're racist assholes who... yes they

are! Yes they are! ... No I'm not running away! But I might if this is how... I'm yelling 'cause you're yelling!"

Max is about slam the receiver down but Jonathan intercepts it, to everyone's surprise.

"Hello, Mrs. Mayf-, Mrs. Hargrove? ... this is Jonathan Byers... yes, Will's older brother... no this wasn't our plan but we don't mind... no sorry, turning back is not an option... well I would just like to say something... take it from someone who doesn't want to see his father ever again, when a kid feels this strongly about seeing their father she's going to get to him some way or another... I'm just saying she's dead-set on it and would've gone regardless so maybe it's good that she chose this way... yes of course, I understand... but you best just accept... yes... no... us? Just going to see the ocean, nothing crazy... yes... right, I promise... yes of course we'll look after them, I promise... yes... yes I'm an experienced driver... well we we've had this road trip planned for a while... yes, this spring... yes, college... New York, both me and Nancy... yes exactly, at Melvald's... yes... thank you... it was nice to talk to you too... bye."

"Well, let's go," he says when he's hung up the phone. The others look at him with bemused expressions.

"Did you just befriend my mom?" Max asks, incredulous. Jonathan shrugs.

"He's very good with mothers," Nancy says and bumps Jonathan's shoulder while they walk back to the car.

"Did you guys just lay silent for four hours straight?" She asks when they're back in the car.

"Yes. Well, kind of dozed off for a while too," Max answers.

"How long have you been awake?"

"Long enough to know that you snore. And that your state quizzes sucks," Max deadpans.

"Hey! Do you wanna walk?"

"She's right, you know," Jonathan mumbles.

"Yeah, listen to Thumper," Lucas grins. Jonathan looks to her, mortified. She just smirks at him, he can have that for mocking her awesome quizzes.

"Also I don't even want to know about the prize," Lucas adds pointedly which causes them both to go crimson.

"I can't believe you guys were silent for so long," she finally says.

"I can't believe you guys didn't notice us," Lucas counters.

"Yeah you owe me five dollars," Max says and pokes Lucas in the ribs.

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They find a diner in some small town a couple of miles outside Springfield, Missouri to have lunch in.

"So Max, tell us about your dad," she prompts when they've settled into a booth and ordered.

"What do you wanna know?"

"Well, what does he do?"

"He's done some different stuff... right now he's a line cook, some diner down in Santa Monica."

"Cool. Does he know we're coming?"

"No. But he said he'd love to see me. He just can't afford plane tickets, or that much time off of work."

"Okay. What's he like?"

"He's fun. You can actually talk to him for real. Not like my mom."

"What do you mean?"

"My mom doesn't understand. She's so... boring and doesn't get like... I don't know, I just can't talk to her. About stuff, y'know. But dad, you could talk to him more. He kind of gets it. Like, that school



sometimes suck and sitting still and doing what your told and not what you want..."

"Oh, okay. How did they meet?"

"He used to tend bar, she came in one night. Apparently she was actually fun, back then. I have trouble imagining that."

"What happened? Why did they separate?" She asks, wary of the sensitive topic but Max just shrugs.

"Mom said he wasn't responsible enough. I think he was. Think she was just being a tightass. Then she met Neil who's like the exact opposite of dad. He's like some assface drill sergeant or something."

"How is it at home?" Jonathan asks.

Max shrugs.

"With him and Billy, I mean. They don't...?"

"No," Max shakes her head. "Neil is just on Billy. And I made sure Billy backed off of me."

"Yeah, we heard about that," she smirks. "Badass."

"Thanks," Max smiles a little.

"But seriously, if they ever... you know. Tell us. I know what it's like so just... if you need any help ever, um..." Jonathan trails off. She squeezes his hand under the table.

"I will. Thanks," Max nods and they change the subject.

---

They stop in the middle of nowhere, Oklahoma, to get gas. The others get out of the car to stretch their legs while he goes into pay. He tries not to get too distracted by Nancy – now in just a tank top and shorts to stave off the scorching Oklahoma sun – pushing her chest out as she arches her back to stretch out. She catches him watching though and gives him that telltale grin she always does when she catches him admiring her. At least Lucas and Max were preoccupied with each

other so they didn't notice. He blushes and heads inside.

The jovial old man behind the counter greets him happily and tells him the amount as he strides up to the counter. The man continues to chitchat as he gets out money to pay.

"Indiana plates, long way from home huh?"

"Yep."

"Where ya heading?"

"LA. See the ocean and stuff."

"That's nice. That's the missus with ya?"

"Maybe someday," he answers while blushing. "And some friends."

"Alrighty. Well, hope you're enjoying Oklahoma. Safe travels!"

"We are, thank you."

He's in a good mood as he turns and walks outside again. He likes Oklahoma, nice people, pretty landscape and he loves being on the road with Nancy. Granted, it was supposed to be just the two of them but he finds that he doesn't really mind the curveball that was Lucas and Max sneaking along. He's always liked Will's friends. Always liked Lucas, nice, easygoing and fiercely loyal Lucas who'd do anything for Will. He'd shown that. Max he didn't know that well, but he felt for her, given her home situation. And she reminded him of Nancy in a way, her toughness and badass attitude. And if she actually had a good dad that she wanted to see, damnit then she should get to do that. He'd help any way he can. They could've just asked instead of being sneaky though, if they had explained it like they did, he would've said yes anyway, and Nancy would've too, he knows. In any case they were good travel companions. Max even said she liked the mix tape he's been playing during the afternoon, one of his newest punk mixes.

His mood instantly changes as soon as he's outside though. One glance and he quickens his pace and takes bigger steps to make it over to them faster. Because they're not alone anymore and apart

from hearing the agitated voices it's enough for him to see Nancy's body language, the way she stands as she's right in the faces of the two bigger guys she's mouthing off with. Lucas and Max stand behind her, clutching each others hand. They look angry too, especially Max, but it's mixed with fear. Not like Nancy who has her Ready-To-Kill-Someone look about her.

"– the fuck is your problem?! Leave my friends alone, they're fourteen years old you ignorant piece of racist shit coward-"

"Bitch you best watch yourself or I'll-" one of the guys starts and grabs a hold of Nancy's arm.

In a flash he's over there, pushing the guy back forcing him to release his grip on Nancy.

"Touch her again and I'll kill you," he growls, staring the guy down as he forces him back. The guy stumbles back, not being as sturdy as he thought.

"You think you're tough?" The guy spits back after he's recovered.

"You think you are?" He counters, standing firm in front of Nancy, Max and Lucas and staring down both guys. The leader stares back, acting tough but seemingly doubting his next move.

"Fuck, let's just drop it Jerry. Not worth the hassle," his friend says and tugs him on the arm. Slowly Jerry nods and backs off, but halts to get in a last word.

"Just get the fuck out of here," he says, finishing with spitting on the ground by Jonathan's feet.

He stands firm and watches them walk away before turning around. As he opens the door for Nancy he whispers:

"You okay?"

She nods and gets in the front seat. Lucas and Max get in the back. He goes around to the driver's side. As he pulls out of the gas station he turns towards the backseat.

"You guys okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks," Lucas answers and Max nods.

"Fucking assholes," Nancy mutters and slides into his side. He wraps an arm around her while keeping the other on the steering wheel.

They drive in silence for at least thirty minutes because there's really not much to say. That encounter really put a damper on the mood. They cross the border into northern Texas. But then Nancy starts rummaging around in a bag on the floor. She pulls out her candy stash.

"Which country has a flag which Texas's flag is almost an exact copy of?" She asks in a straight-forward manner.

He thinks for a second.

"Chile," Lucas answers from the backseat.

"Correct," Nancy notes and hands him a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup.

"Where was JFK shot?"

"In the head?" He and Max both answer at the same time.

"No I meant where in Dallas," Nancy huffs. He smirks a little, she gets so cute when she's like that.

"Dealey Plaza," he answers.

"Right."

The correct answer earns him a Twizzler. And Nancy has managed to lift their spirits back up.

---

Just past the border into New Mexico they stop at the Blue Swallow Inn in Tucumcari for the night. They get two cheap single rooms and the sweet old lady behind the counter gives one key to Jonathan and one to her, apparently thinking – or hoping – that she'd bunk with Max and Jonathan with Lucas. They go off to the rooms.

"No funny business," she tells Max and Lucas before handing over the key to Max. They both roll their eyes.

"Gross. We don't... do *stuff*," Max grimaces before continuing. "And same to you. Keep in mind the walls might be thin..." Max throws right back at her and succeeds in making both her and Jonathan to go crimson again.

"This is pretty nice," she notes as they walk inside their room and drops the bags on the floor.

"Yeah," he agrees, flopping down on the bed immediately, stretching out his back. He must be beat from driving all day. She follows him onto the bed, facing him as he lays on his back she combs her hands through his hair which she likes to do. It's just so soft. His hands immediately finds her sides and he holds her close. His eyes flutter open.

"Hey."

"Hey."

She presses a kiss to his soft lips.

"Tired?"

"Mm."

"Thanks for driving all day. But just tell me if you want to switch."

"Mm. I like driving you."

"I like you driving me too," she tells him. She does. She's alright to drive herself, she thinks she's good at it, Jonathan does too, but she gets impatient and a bit stressed. Speeds more. She much prefers to sit beside Jonathan while he drives. She loves him driving. Makes her feel safe. "But still."

"I will."

"And thanks for Oklahoma," she says with emphasis.

He looks up at her puzzled for a second. Just like he didn't think twice about getting right in the face of two bigger, aggressive guys to protect her, Max and Lucas, he doesn't seem to think it's the big deal that it is.

"Of course," he finally says.

"Thank you."

"Stop saying that," he says with a smile.

"Okay," she says with a smile because he's smiling at her and it's therefore impossible not to smile back at him. She presses another kiss to his lips. "So... how tired are you?" She asks and lets her hand start to trail south down his body. She feels his breath hitch slightly.

"Wide awake," he quickly answers and kisses her back.

---

"It's too hot and humid to sleep," she says later, *after*.

He makes a noise in agreement.

"Way too hot," she repeats. But only cuddles up closer to his warm body.

She whines when he moves and gets out of bed. She stops when he tells her he saw a vending machine outside so he'll go and get a cold soda. He throws on boxers and a t-shirt.

He's not the only one with this idea. By the vending machine he finds Max, wearing pyjamas bottoms and a too big Q\*bert t-shirt. He smooths down his bedhead and hopes it's not obvious what they've been doing.

"Hey."

"Oh, hey," she jolts a little but relaxes when she sees it's him.

"Can't sleep?" He asks.

"No, it's too hot," she answers while putting quarters into the

machine. "You guys?"

"Yeah no same. Need to cool down."

"Mm," Max hums while pushing the button for a Sprite. "Hey thanks again."

"For what?"

"For before. Oklahoma."

"Oh. No problem. Those guys were assholes. And cowards, going after you."

"And racist idiots."

"And racist idiots," he agrees. "Crazy that you have to deal with those. People should just leave people alone. Mind their own business."

"Yeah. But anyway, thanks. You were badass. You both were."

"No problem," he says again, not really sure of what to say to that. He just did what... well what else was he supposed to do? Stepping in is the only option in that situation. He can't just stand idly by, can he?

"And thanks for everything, really. I mean letting us tag along, talking to my mom..."

"Oh. Yeah no problem. I mean, you guys could've just... asked us. If you had explained it like you did we would've let you come with anyway, you wouldn't have had to hide for hours."

"Oh. Good to know."

"And again, if it ever gets too... you know, with Mr. Hargrove, or with Billy, tell me."

"Okay."

"Or if you just... need to talk, or whatever... I know what it's like. To grow up with that."

"Right. Yeah. Yeah Will's mentioned it... a little. It was, bad, for you?"

"When your dad was around?"

"Yeah. Yes. I just tried to... endure it. Take it all. So that Will didn't have to..."

"Right."

"But uh, I mean. It does get better. I mean, it sucks, to live with someone like that but it's not... forever."

"Right."

"And come to me if..."

"Yeah. Yeah I will," Max nods.

"But so your dad... he's good?"

"Yeah. He's real good."

"That's good. You excited to see him?"

"Yeah, real excited. Do you think we'll get there tomorrow?"

"Hm, no it's still far off. New Mexico and Arizona is bigger than you think, y'know? Figuring we might make it just across the border into California tomorrow and then get to LA the morning after."

"Oh, okay. Cool. Coke or Sprite?"

"Huh?"

"You want a Coke or a Sprite?" Max repeats and motions towards the vending machine.

"Oh! Coke," he answers since it's what Nancy prefers. Just as he realizes he forgot to bring money Max is already putting more of her money into the machine.

"Thanks, you'll get it back tomorrow," he says as she hands him a Coke.

"Don't be an idiot. After everything. My treat. Also, you're keeping



track of the gas total right?"

"Nancy is."

"Good, we'll sort it out later. For real. I'm no mooch. We're paying our way."

"Right. Thanks."

"See you in the morning."

"Yeah, good night."

They part and he feels very good about the interaction as he walks back towards his and Nancy's room. He's glad he ran into Max. That is, until he hears her voice call after him:

"By the way, nice hickey!"

He can feel all the color drain from his face and then return in a bright red shade. He halts his step. Tries to think of something to say. Comes up with nothing. So he resolves to just walk back to Nancy. He tries to be quiet as he enters the room, in case she fell asleep while he was gone.

"What took you so long?"

Apparently not. Her words make him jolt just a little as he's got his back turn towards her when he's closing the door. He turns around and is greeted by the sight of Nancy, sitting up a bit against the headboard, still in all her naked glory, fanning herself with one of her roadmaps while the soft moonlight streaming in through the window plays over her body. The sight is enough to make him almost drop the Coke and for his mouth to go dry. She smirks a little at him. She can tell. He sits down next to her, opens the can and takes a drink before passing it to her and answering.

"I ran into Max by the vending machine."

"Ah."

"We had a good talk. But..."

"But?"

"Thanks for this," he dryly notes and points to the hickey.

"Oh boohoo," she playfully mocks. "Do you need me to kiss your boo-boo?"

"Sounds counterproductive. Fighting fire with fire."

"Mm. So what did you guys talk about?"

"Oh, the trip. Dads. Kind of."

Nancy looks at him with her kind eyes and rubs his arm softly before dropping her head on his shoulder.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

---

They get out on the road early the next morning. Nancy tries her best to help him cover up the hickey. She is somewhat successful but he's still pretty sure Lucas and Max's snickering when they first see them has to do with it. They drive through desert, desert and more desert. Max ribs him for putting Bobby Womack's version of *California Dreamin'* on a tape. It's cliché, she points out. He agrees but he couldn't resist. Plus it's a good song. And Nancy loves it. In any case he's got *On the Road Again* by Canned Heat on the tape too so it was already cliché.

"So you two," Nancy suddenly starts after they've been driving in silence listening to the tape for a while, looking in the rearview mirror at Lucas and Max who both look up quizzically at her. "You've been... going steady for over a year now?"

"Going steady?" Lucas questions her choice of words.

"What is happening?" Max questions, raising her eyebrows.

"Jeez, I'm just asking," Nancy rolls her eyes.

"Yes we've been going steady for over a year now, *Mom*," Max answers. Another eye roll from Nancy.

"Just saying, that's a pretty long time for your age."

"I guess," Max shrugs.

"But that's great! That you like each other."

"Yep," Lucas answers and glances to Max.

"Uh-huh," the redheaded girl replies. "It's not a big deal. He's fun," she continues.

"She's cool," Lucas adds.

"So we just... hang out. Because it's awesome," Max explains.

"Really awesome." Lucas tacks on again.

"Yeah no, that's all there is to it. I mean that's what it's about. That's good. I just meant, it's nice, or cool or whatever that you found each other," Nancy says.

Silence in the backseat for a moment. Then Max's voice again.

"So... you are too?"

"Hm? What?" Nancy wonders. He too.

"You two are *going steady* too, it's nice," Max grins.

Nancy huffs, exasperated and he tries to contain his grin.

"God I was just making conversation," she mutters while they hear more snickering from the backseat.

"Well, we are pretty steady-going," he smirks and puts an arm around her shoulders while keeping the other on the steering wheel. She gives him a sideways glance and smirks back.

"Very, I'd say."

When they cross the border into California in the evening they all cheer. They find a cheap motel in some small town near the Mojave Desert to stay the night, sharing a room all four of them this time to save money. They're all bone tired and soon drift off. Tomorrow they will reach LA. They can't wait. But no one as much as Max.

### 3. LA is the place, set my mind ablaze

As soon as the skyline of downtown Los Angeles becomes visible for them, Lucas and Max in the backseat whoop and cheer and pounds their fists against the roof of the car. He's about to tell them to quiet down when Nancy joins in. He just smiles and shakes his head. He's excited too, but they're not there yet.

"Okay okay, quiet down," Nancy admonishes after she's stopped. "Now when we get to LA – how do we find your dad, Max? Do you have an adress?"

"Yeah, but I guess he'll be at work, it's the middle of the day."

"Okay, where's that? Do you know where the restaurant is?"

"I know the name of it, and that it's in Venice sort of, near Santa Monica. But not the street adress."

"Alright. Then we do it like this: Once we reach LA and get off the interstate we find a gas station or something because we're running low and there we can probably find a city map and maybe a phonebook to look up the restaurant. Then we'll go there."

They all nod in agreement. Nancy's good with plans.

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"1025 Abbot Kinney Boulevard," Max reads from the phonebook.

Nancy studies the map intently, tracing it with her index finger.

"Got it."

"Let's roll."

With the help of the map and some directions from Max they manage to get down to Venice and eventually find the restaurant. It's a small diner, and the seafood place across the street looks busier. But maybe they just missed the lunch rush. Inside it's cozy but almost empty. They sit down in a booth and a waitress comes over right away.

"Hey kids, what can I get you?"

"Is Larry in today?" Max asks.

"Yeah, who's asking?"

"His daughter."

The waitress raises an eyebrow.

"One second," she says before turning around and going back to the counter. "Hey Larry!" She shouts back to the kitchen.

"What?" A deeper voice calls back. Max perks up.

"Your daughter's here!"

"What?!" Another more agitated shout is heard followed by the distinct noise of kitchen utensils clattering to the ground. Hurried footsteps and then a tall, stocky, bearded man comes out of the kitchen, appearing behind the counter. Max stands up and gets out of the booth.

"Hey, Dad."

They just stare at each other for a second. Then Mr. Mayfield, moves out from behind the counter and towards Max. The redheaded girl immediately runs toward him and throws her arms around his neck. He envelops her in a hug and lifts her up off the ground. He's mumbling something to her that they can't quite pick up in the booth. It feels almost awkward to witness the intimate moment but she can't contain her wide smile. She glances to Jonathan who looks equally happy, and Lucas who has a huge grin on his face.

"Baby girl, what are you doing here?!" Max's dad asks when he finally puts her down.

"Since you couldn't come to Indiana, I came here. I wanted to see you."

"Baby girl! Gosh am I glad to see you! I can't believe you're here! How are you? You're so tall! God I can't believe this! But how did you

get here?!" Mr. Mayfield has a barrage of questions, understandably.

"Got a ride with some friends," Max answers and gestures to them. Mr. Mayfield looks up and registers their presence for the first time. He looks a bit puzzled. They awkwardly give some small waves to him.

"Hello there!" He smiles back after a second. They mumble greetings back.

"Hey, come meet people," Max says and tugs her dad with her over to them. "This is my boyfriend Lucas."

Lucas stands up and looks a bit nervous. He really has shot up like a weed this past year but Max's dad is big and looms over him.

"So you're the famous Lucas! Heard a lot about you, nice to finally meet you son," Mr. Mayfield's face splits into a wide grin and he sticks out a large hand for Lucas to shake.

"Nice to meet you too Mr. Mayfield," Lucas still a bit nervous replies.

"Please, call me Larry! Now, who are these two?" Mr. Mayfield, or Larry continues and looks to Max while gesturing at them.

"Nancy," she supplies.

"Jonathan," Jonathan jumps in.

"Nancy is my friend Mike's sister and Jonathan is my friend Will's brother. They were going on a roadtrip out here anyway so me and Lucas got a ride from them," Max explains.

"That's one way to say it, yes," she says to Max before turning to Larry. "Nice to meet you!"

He smiles and shakes her hand and then Jonathan's.

"Okay there's a story here and I need to hear it," he then says, looking bemused between them and Max. "But wait, you guys must be starving! How long have you been driving? Hang on, let me fix you guys some food then I need to hear all about this!"

He promptly turns around and goes back to the counter where the waitress is standing watching now joined by another cook.

"Manny! Fire up the grill! Nothing but the best for my big little girl and her friends!" Larry calls out to the other chef who smiles and shakes his head while Larry ushers him into the kitchen with him.

---

"- so we just lay still and quiet under the blankets until Missouri when it was too far for them to turn back!" Max finishes gleefully relaying the story of how they got there. Larry howls with laughter.

"Again, completely unnecessary, if you'd just explained it to us like you did, we would've taken you with us anyway," she says.

"God that takes me back, I remember when I was 15, me and your Uncle Bernie wanted to go up to San Fran to see Jimi Hendrix play but our parents wouldn't let us go so we climbed onto the back of my neighbor Lenny's flatbed truck when he was driving up there for some work thing. But before he left LA he drove through a damn car wash! We were soaked and freezing coming out of there! But at least the weather was nice so we dried up on the drive along the highway at least," Larry chuckles while telling the story and they laugh with him.

"Did you guys make it to see Hendrix?" Jonathan asks.

"We did! It was awesome, one of the best nights of my life. He was playing at this club in Haight-Ashbury and we managed to sneak in. Crazy night. Was grounded for like months after but it was worth it, you kids understand right? You two ever snuck off without your parents knowing?"

"Um..." She starts. Max snorts with laughter, Jonathan looks embarrassed.

"Oh boy have they ever," Lucas bursts out laughing.

"Hey!" She tries to protest.

"I'll take that as a yes," Larry grins. "But that's good, you're young you should do that, have fun, go out there and explore, see the world," he



continues.

"Right," she agrees.

"Yeah," Jonathan chimes in. "Thanks for the food, it was great. But on that note I think we're gonna go out and explore LA, let you guys catch up," he continues, she nods in agreement.

"Yeah it was delicious, what do we owe you?" She asks, getting out her purse.

"No no no what are you crazy? My treat of course, you go out and waste your money in this beautiful city! We need it, it's people like you who keep LA in business!"

"Oh, well thanks a lot."

"No problem, you guys go have fun and just meet us back here later tonight, or at my place, I live just around the corner on Wavecrest, you're all invited to stay of course."

"Oh, well we don't want to intrude or-"

"No no, nonsense come on! You've brought my daughter all the way here and you need to save money so you can waste it on the boulevards! And I've got plenty of room, it may not be a castle but I've got an extra futon and a pull-out sofa so you'll all fit."

Jonathan chokes on his drink when Larry mentions the pull-out sofa. She pats him on the back as he coughs and answers for them.

"That sounds great, thanks a lot!"

"That went great," she says as they get back inside the car.

"Yeah," he agrees and turns the engine.

"Larry is awesome," she states.

"Yeah, I'm glad. For Max," he agrees.

"Me too."

"So, where to now?" He asks, looking at her.

"Well," she begins, looking down at her map. "Let's see the hell out of those famous sights, I guess!"

"Hollywood, here we come," he says with glee in his voice. She looks up. "In the most beat up car the boulevards will ever have seen," he continues in the dry sarcastic tone she knows and loves.

"That's the spirit!"

---

"William Frawley? Nina Foch? William Farnum? Who the hell *are* these people?" She asks, exasperated as she looks down at the stars in the pavement.

"I don't know," Jonathan answers from where he's walking half a step behind her, just like her peering down at the pavement.

"I thought this was supposed to be the Walk of Fame but I don't know any of these- hey! Now we're talking!" She exclaims and points as she finally sees a familiar name. "Look, Humphrey Bogart! And who was it that he played?" She turns around and asks him while still pointing down at the star, referencing her quiz question from way back in Illinois. Instead of answering Jonathan raises his camera to his face and takes a photo of her before she can react, of her pointing down at the star while smirking at him. She makes a face at him after the photo is taken.

"Detective Marlowe," he smiles before walking up to her and putting an arm around her, pressing a kiss to her temple as they continue walking.

"Okay so the Walk of Fame is pretty lame-" she starts.

"Yes, Dr. Seuss," he interrupts, grinning.

"Shut up," she gives him a light smack on the arm. "But LA is pretty cool."

"Yeah," he agrees. "Nice weather too. Almost scorching, but we shouldn't complain."

"Yeah, a lot better than Indiana."

She spots a stand selling hats, postcards and other junk to tourists.

"Come on," she grabs his hand and leads him towards it.

"Why?" He chuckles but follows.

"I don't want you to sunburn, Thumper," she explains as she grabs a hat off the rack, a gray one with the words HOLLYWOOD BLVRD stamped on it, and puts it on his head. "Plus, Larry's right, we haven't really done LA if we haven't blown some money on stupid stuff on Hollywood Boulevard," she continues. He looks bemused at her when she looks him over and shakes her head as she reaches a conclusion. "Boring color. Let's see..."

She puts a white one with LA printed on it on him next, but quickly discards it. Also boring. A black one with logo in the form of the Hollywood sign next. A bit *too* tacky. He stands patiently.

"Hm..." she hesitates at a purple one with the Lakers logo on it. "This looks pretty good on you but hm, then people might ask you about basketball."

"Well we can't have that now, can we."

"Right? Hm, maybe..." she tries a red one reading CALIFORNIA on him next. "Maybe. But- oooh," she spots a teal one with a palm tree on it and immediately puts it on him. "Now we're talking!" She turns to the guy manning the stand. "This one please!"

---

They continue to aimlessly explore the area, going from Hollywood Boulevard down to Sunset to see what all the fuss is about and stroll around there before he breaks his idea to her. He's not sure if she's thought of it too, but it really is the only landmark thing he definitely thought they should seek out while here. She hasn't mentioned it, but his idea stems from noticing the old astronomy books on her bookshelf.

"Hey let's go to the Griffith Observatory, I think it could be interesting. Plus I heard you can see the whole city from up there," he

turns to her and suggests.

"Ooh, yes! Great idea!" She beams at him, her whole face lights up and he has to kiss her because how can he not when she is like that?

The observatory is by far the most impressive building he's ever been in. Thank God the admission was free. He's kind of awestruck by the sheer enormity of the place and the beautiful architecture. Nancy seems similarly impressed. She grabs a map of the place at the entrance and her eyes lights up even more. They head to the planetarium first because a showing is just about to start. It's really cool, with all the projections and stuff. It's pretty crowded and people tune into listen to the enthusiastic lecturer who talks about all the planets and stars they see with passion. But the two of them get lost in their own little world, staring up at the projections above them, Nancy pointing out different stars and constellations.

"See there's Cassiopeia. And over there's Orion's belt, you can make it out right? If you go from that star there and follow to the right..." she excitedly whispers while pointing.

"Yeah I see it," he whispers back while following her finger.

She continues to point out all kinds of different stars and constellations. He could listen to her forever, hearing her being so passionate about a subject is beautiful. He makes a mental note to plan a thousand dates that's just them laying on a blanket in a field staring up at a star-filled night-sky.

They go to the Ahmanson Hall of the Sky exhibit next to see star paths. Then the Wilder Hall of the Eye to look at all kinds of equipment astronomers have used throughout history. Nancy tells him about how she wished for a telescope when she was seven but her dad just got her a toy one because he didn't think she was serious about wanting a real one. He makes another mental note to one day, when he's not broke, get her one.

As they walk around the exhibit, looking at different types of telescopes and other devices used and read the signs, Nancy expands on the information telling him about Galileo Galilei, magnification and all the rest. Gradually he becomes suspicious of, and then pretty

certain, that they're being followed. By a small group of people. Tourists like them. They seem to be listening, hanging on Nancy's every word. But she's oblivious, caught up in looking at all the objects and telling him about it all.

"Excuse me, Miss, could you tell us a little bit about this thing, what was this used for?" A man wearing sandals, shorts and a cheap camera around his neck suddenly pipes up. Nancy turns around, surprised.

"Huh? Oh yes, that is a- wait, do you think I work here?" She starts answering but then catches onto the odd situation.

"You don't?" The man asks, surprised and the others with him looks equally confused. "I'm sorry I thought you were a guide since you knew so much..."

"No I don't work here!" Nancy says, exasperated.

"Might as well," he can't help but mumble, grinning.

"We're just here on vacation," she continues.

"Oh, sorry!" The man apologizes. Nancy thinks for a second then seems to make her mind up.

"...well in any case that thing is a micrometer which they used to measure the space between objects in the sky. It was actually the first instrument put onto a telescope. If you look here..."

Nancy ends up just accepting her role as unofficial guide and the group – first consisting of a family of four, the father in which was the man who asked about the micrometer – and a couple of seniors, soon grow a little more as they pick up more visitors. Nancy tells them all about the exhibits and he's just continually astounded as to how she can store all this info *and more* in her head. At the end they even applaud Nancy and the tourist dad gives her a few bucks in tip. She thanks them profusely.

The two of them heads out to an observation deck.

"So..." he starts.

"Yes?" She smiles up at him and tucks herself into his side.

"You're amazing."

"Thanks. You too."

"Thanks. And you're a complete nerd."

"I know. You too."

"I know. I love you."

"Love you too."

She snags his hat as they stand on the terrace looking out over Los Angeles as the sun sets. It's a gorgeous view. He sneakily steps back and snaps a photo, Los Angeles in the background, Nancy in the foreground looking out over it. It's a gazillion times more gorgeous view.

---

"So what did you guys do?" Max asks when they link up with her, Lucas and her dad again back at his little house in Venice in the evening.

"Explored Hollywood," Jonathan answers.

"And went to the Griffith Observatory! It was awesome!" Nancy tacks on.

"You guys are such nerds," Max dryly replies.

"You're a nerd," Nancy counters.

"No I'm not, he is," Max answers and points to Lucas at her side.

"Fair," Lucas shrugs and grins. Max smiles. "And you bought yourself a hat?" Lucas continues and points to Nancy.

"No I bought Jonathan a hat," she replies. "I'm just borrowing it," she continues when Lucas, Max and Larry look at her quizzically.

"So what did you guys do?" Jonathan asks and Lucas and Max

launches into telling them about going around Max's old neighborhood in Venice and hanging with Larry.

Larry's home is messy and disorganized but cozy. It's very far from her own home which her mom keeps obsessively spotless. And it's not like Jonathan's house either, which is more of a clutter (though Jonathan tidies up) than hers but very cozy. Larry's home reminds her a bit more of Murray's actually. It's not as bad – Murray lived in a goddamn bunker, this is a small but nice little house typical of Venice – but it's the same feeling of there being stuff just everywhere you look. Books, magazines, records, tapes, the odd skateboard, roller skates and just random things. It's not dirty or anything just... cluttered. He apologizes for the mess, they thank him for his hospitality.

Larry regales them with tales of his life in California. He's really lived an eventful and seemingly fun life overall, endless twists to his life's tale. Jonathan snaps a photo of Max and her dad laughing together and promises to send it to Larry later. Larry veers into telling stories about a young Max, to the girl's great embarrassment and theirs – especially Lucas's – great amusement.

"– and so the school calls me and says Max has been in a fight, and I call Susan and we go down there. Susan is freaking out, me not so much but they tell us she was in a fight with two boys so even I get a little little worried then. We walk in and the principal says it's very serious – that she landed *two* boys in the nurse's office!"

"They were jerks!" Max butts in.

"I'm sure they were honey, and so she's sitting in the principal's office sulking and the other two's moms are upset and I could barely keep a straight face like ladies please, your boys were two against one against my girl! Thank God Susan was there."

"Why?" Max challenges.

"Maxie, you gotta cut your mom some slack. She's way better than me at almost everything. Including arguing, she made them and the principal see reason and made sure you weren't suspended or anything."

"Hm. I would've been fine with a suspension, no school..."

"Hah, I'm sure you would've been, but we weren't thrilled about that prospect. Anyway, be nice to Susan, she tries her best and it goes a long way I think," Larry says.

"Hm," is Max's response.

They spend the night on the pull-out sofa in Larry's living room. They don't do stuff – they're way too tired for it plus there's three other people in the small house with thin walls – but they can't help but reminisce, cuddled together whispering about the last time they spent the night on a stranger's pull-out sofa, until they fall asleep.

---

Larry makes them all breakfast in the morning. Lucas and Max plan to go around Venice more so Max can show him her old hangouts. She brought her skateboard with her – somehow managing to hide that with her in the backseat of the car, and Lucas will borrow her old BMX bike which Larry kept. Larry's got to work during the day but got the evening off to be with Max and Lucas.

But they hit the beach instead, she and Jonathan. Even though he's "not a beach person" he's swayed by the heat, by her pointing out that he does enjoy swimming with her at the quarry (when they're alone) and that she wants to try out her new two-piece. Venice Beach is crowded but after walking a bit down they find an okay spot to put down their things. They go out into the water right away. As they're walking out Jonathan keeps stealing glances down at her, in her new yellow bikini.

"You're really hot," he whispers in her ear.

She looks down and blushes. Somehow it still flusters her, when he tells her she's hot, pretty, beautiful. They've been together long enough now that he doesn't hesitate at all to say stuff like that. Which he does all the time. She remembers in the beginning when it flustered both of them, him struggling with how to tell her she was pretty, like it was embarrassing for him to say it to her face. She thinks he got past it when her reaction was to blush and smile and say thanks. Then he just kept on telling her. That she is pretty,



beautiful, gorgeous, *hot*. And each time he says it so sincere, like it's this undisputeable fact to him which still amazes him every day.

"Thanks. You too," she answers and looks him up and down in his green swim trunks and it's his turn to bashfully look down because he's damn sure still not over the fact that *she* finds *him* pretty, beautiful, gorgeous and hot and will tell him so.

They swim out and lark about in the water. He takes hold of her and dips her under. She splashes water in his face in retaliation. After a while they get out and go back to their beach towel. She puts on sunscreen on her arms and then asks him to do her back. She loves the soft feeling of his hands caressing her. She returns the favor, rubbing it on his body. She doesn't want her snack to burn.

"What do you think of Venice?" She asks as they lay back on the towel.

"Cool place. You know The Doors formed here," he replies.

"I didn't know that. Are you quizzing me now?" She smirks back.

"Hm, I could," he smiles. "Name a song by-" he starts.

"Come on baby light my fire, try to set the night on fire," she interrupts, singing the chorus of their hit to him in a low voice.

"That was pretty hot," he beams at her. She smiles and pecks his cheek.

"You put it on the third mix tape you made me. And again on the sixteenth."

He ducks his head, embarrassed. She tilts his chin up again and smiles.

"I appreciated it both times," she lets him know and kisses him again.

"You have a nice voice," he tells her.

"You too. We should form a band and make a fortune," she grins back.

They relax on the beach for a while, enjoying the sun and each other's company. After a half hour or so Jonathan gets up.

"I'm gonna go for another dip to cool down, you want to come?"

"Nah, I'm good. You go ahead."

He really looks very good. Great. She thinks, as she watches him walk down the beach and wade out into the water. His now wet swim trunks clinging to him. His broad back lightly tanned. God she really loves his back. She's quite content to shamelessly ogle him like this. He's hers to ogle, after all. She hears a group of people, teen girls around her age by the sound of it, sit down some feet away from her, behind her and to the left. She ignores them and continues to look at her man as he's now wading out of the water after a quick dip. Water dripping down his lean but yet built chest. To be honest this was one of her top reasons to go to the beach, to get to see a lot of tanned Jonathan in nothing but swim trunks.

"Ooh, hot guy at two o'clock!" She hears one of the girls behind her call out. Who cares, she's got her own hot guy right- wait. From where they're sitting, one o'clock is...

"Where?" Another voice asks.

"There, getting out of the water. Dark hair, green trunks."

"Ooh, yes."

Yep, it's definitely Jonathan they've spotted. She smiles to herself.

"Me like. Wonder if he's here with anyone? Looks like he's alone."

"Oh he's coming this way!"

"Should we do something?"

Her smile gets wider. Sorry ladies, he's taken. Her smile grows even more when Jonathan makes eye contact with her and smiles at her. The girls seem to miss that. But they certainly don't miss it when Jonathan sits down next to her again. She reaches out and puts an arm around his neck, pulling him in for a short but sweet kiss. She

can hear disappointed noises and grumbling behind her.

---

They continue to hang out on Venice Beach for most of the day. She in whispers inform him of what she overheard and he blushes like never before when she informs that he's goddamn eye-candy. When they start to get hungry they put on some clothes and head down to the diner where Larry works and sit down at the counter.

"Hey kids, what can I get you?" The as always cheerful man greets them with.

"Hm, well what does the chef recommend?" She smiles.

"Hm... you should try our avocado melt, has that made it over to Indiana yet?"

"Nope, sounds great."

"Yeah," Jonathan adds.

"Coming right up. So how did you guys like the beach?"

"It was great. Venice is cool."

"Yeah, I like it here. Been living in all kinds of different areas around here over the years but I think Venice might be my favorite, think I'll stay here."

"And it's where Max grew up too, right?" She asks.

"Yeah, for the most part. We moved around a bit but think she has most of her memories of LA here from Venice."

"Have you seen her and Lucas today?"

"Yeah, they were in here an hour ago to get something to eat, they're flinging themselves around all over Venice, she wants to show it to him."

"That's sweet."

"Yeah. I can't wait to get off work, I've really missed her."

"She's missed you too. Raved about you on the way here."

"That's nice," Larry smiles and serves them their sandwiches. "She's always been my number one. But... maybe she looks at me with a bit of rose-tinted glasses. I'm far from the perfect dad. I hope she doesn't feel like... I abandoned her because I didn't it just didn't work out... me and Susan," he continues, sounding almost melancholy for once.

"I don't think she blames you at all," Jonathan says.

"Or Susan, really," Larry continues. "She really is much better than me in a lot of ways, hope she realizes that... me and Susan had our problems but she's a great mom."

"What happened?" She warily pries, might be a sensitive subject but she's already got Max's version, she's curious to hear his.

"I don't know. I loved her, guess I still do in a way. But maybe we were just too different, in the end. They say opposites attract and all that, and maybe that was us at the start. I mean, we overlap in a lot of ways too but... she's always wanted more... stability, I guess? I was always restless, I didn't really want to... settle down as much as her. I mean, I was so happy to have Max, Max is everything, but I didn't see... still don't see why having a kid would have to change how you live your life so completely. Of course you adapt, I adapted but Susan wanted more, or different... I don't know. Big house in the suburbs, white picket fence, nine-to-five office job and all that I was never really into. She wanted that. We just drifted apart more and more," Larry looks wistful.

"Guess that just happens sometimes," she offers.

"Yeah," Larry nods. "But uh, Max. She's... she's happy in Indy, right? With Susan and... Neil?" He asks, looking at them both intently.

"I think she's happy... yes. I mean with Lucas and her friends. And Susan."

"And Neil?"

"To be honest, she hates him."

"Right. But is he... is he bad news?"

"He's an asshole. But he doesn't put his hands on her, if that's what you're asking."

"Right no, figured. Susan wouldn't have that."

"Right."

"And yeah, she has her friends and Lucas. So think she's happy."

"Right, good. I like Lucas. Good kid."

"Yeah, he is."

"Well, anyway. Enough about that! How's your sandwiches?" Larry straightens up and resumes his usual jovial mood.

"Great," they both answer at the same time. Larry grins.

"You're a cute couple. And fun too! Love the mindset with taking a trip like this, that's exactly how it should be. You're young, the world is yours to explore!"

"Right!"

"It's great that you found each other. Don't know you that well but you seem to have a special connection. Hold on to that."

They both nod, blushing.

"What do you kids got planned for tonight then?" Larry asks.

"Um... not really sure yet," Jonathan answers.

"Yeah, you got any tips?" She asks.

"Hm, well there's a cool bar you guys might like, sort of off-off Sunset," Larry begins. "It's pretty chill and has always been a cool music venue too, they always have bands playing, they probably have something tonight. Lot of punk stuff, I've seen Fear, Dead Kennedys

and Black Flag there," he continues. Jonathan and him bonded over their shared musical taste last night.

"Sounds awesome," she says and Jonathan nods excitedly, he lighted up just at the mentions of the bands. "But uh, we're 18... can we get in?"

"Oh, right... yeah to be honest that shouldn't be a problem. This place is pretty lax with that sort of stuff..."

"Alright, cool, we'll check that out!"

---

In the car driving over to "off-off Sunset" Nancy had time to construct about five different plans to get into the club depending on different scenarios. In the end turned out to be completely unnecessary.

"Hot girl, you in," a bouncer who only seemed to have a passing interest in his actual job, said, pointed at Nancy and waved her through. He got in by virtue of Nancy clutching his hand in hers and immediately marching in. He guesses no one dared object.

"What a sleaze. But hey, every cloud has a silver-lining, even sexism it turns out, because we got in!" She shouts in his ear to drown out the loud music as they walk further in. He presses a kiss to her temple.

The place is a bit dingy, cramped and covered with posters showcasing different bands and shows. It's full of people, both at the bar and by the small stage on the other side. They waded through the crowd towards the stage where some guy with long hair is belting out a rap so fast they can't really pick up more than the odd line or two which seems to simply be about LA and Hollywood.

"What's the band called? I forgot to look at the poster outside," Nancy shouts in his ear, putting her arm over his shoulders to pull him in close while he keeps his arm circled around her waist.

He has no idea and is about to tell her so but right then the highly energetic base player who's been jumping around the stage the whole song while laying down a slapping base line grabs a mic and shouts:

"We are the Reeeced! Hoooot! Chili Peppers! Ow!"

"Ah, there we go," Nancy laughs in his ear while the band launches into the next song, with the long-haired singer now rapping something about being a *Jungle Man*. "What do you think?" She continues.

"Ahh, I don't know! They're a bit too funky for me maybe but uh, I like their energy! The basist is crazy but good, and the guitarist is awesome. What do you think?"

"They're fun! I can barely catch a word of his rapping though!"

"Me neither!"

They dance, or more like jump around like the rest of the crowd to the music through a few songs. When the band launches into a song that seems to literally be called *Get Up and Jump* though the crowd goes nuts and starts to frantically jump around and into each other. Neither of them are into that really so he wades through the crowd back towards the bar with Nancy tucked into his side.

"Hang on, I'm gonna try and get a beer," Nancy tells him and goes up to the bar. He stands back and watches as she immediately gets the bartender's attention. Really the attention of all the guys near the bar who "subtly" check her out. Nancy quickly returns with the beer and immediately gives him a big kiss. He eagerly kisses her back and wraps an arm around her again. In the corner of his eyes he can see guys disappointedly turning away.

"If it weren't for the fact that just about every other guy than you is a creep, being a girl wouldn't be the worst," Nancy smiles, no doubt conscious of how sleazy guys leer at her. He kisses her again.

They find a little corner to themselves to hang out in, pressed together so they can hear each other over the music. She offers him the beer.

"I'm driving," he reminds her.

"I know, one sip won't do anything. Shame you can't drink tonight though," she replies.

"Why is that?" He asks after taking a sip and passing the bottle back to her.

"Because you get a bit handsy when you're drunk and I quite enjoy it," she smiles.

"Hey I can get handsy right now if you want me to," he throws back and lets his hand on her back ride up inside her shirt. Her eyes go big and she almost spits out the beer she'd just sipped.

"Dork," she giggles after she's swallowed down the beer hard. "I didn't say stop," she adds when he starts to remove his hand. So he keeps it there, tracing patterns over her lower back and hip. She leans up and kisses him again.

"You know how you get when you're drunk?" He asks her.

"How?"

"Cute," he grins at her.

"You too," she giggles at him. "Hey," she suddenly turns more serious. "LA is cool."

"Yeah," he agrees.

"And I bet New York will be even cooler," she continues.

"Yeah."

"And being on the road with you is cool."

"With you it's the best."

"Right. So. I can't wait for the fall, for New York. With you."

"Me neither."

"I want to see the world. I want to see it with you," she says and looks him in the eye.

"I want to see everything with you," he tells her.



"Exactly. So. No bullshit, let's make a deal. A promise. That we'll never stop doing this. Going on trips like this. To wherever. Whenever we can."

"Deal. I promise. No bullshit," he replies and they seal it with a kiss.

Nancy finishes her beer and they go back to dance/jump around some more but still turn in pretty early because they're set to head out early the next morning on the drive back home. They can't afford to be gone many more days and Jonathan has to be back at work soon.

---

"Thanks for all the food and the hospitality and everything," Nancy says and hugs Larry.

"Don't mention it. Great to meet you," he smiles back.

"Yeah, thanks for everything," Jonathan says and hugs Larry when it's his turn to say goodbye.

"Hey now, don't mention it. Thanks to you two for bringing my kid here. Thank you."

They nod and step back. Lucas is next to say goodbye. Larry pulls him into a bear hug and tells him it's been great getting to know him. Then only Max remains. Together with Lucas they step away a bit, going over to the car, to give Larry and Max some privacy.

"I don't want to go," Max says.

"Hey now, I'd love for you to stay but you gotta go home," Larry responds.

"Why?"

"Because your mom loves you, because she's way better at taking care of you than I am, because you go to school there, because your friends and Lucas are there."

Max doesn't respond.

"And... I haven't been the best. But maybe... hey I'll talk to Susan. Maybe we can make it so that you can come out here more often. Or I can come to Hawkins... I want to see you more. I need to make more of an effort to do it."

"Promise?"

"Promise. I'll talk to her. And I'll start putting away money. And remember you can always call."

"Right."

"We'll see each other."

"Okay."

"I love you."

"Love you too."

It's silent in the car, except for the music, all the way until they get on the interstate. Not a lot to say. Max looks out the window, seemingly lost in thought until she suddenly snaps out of it.

"Thanks again for taking us," she says in a quiet voice.

"No problem," he tells her.

"Did you guys have fun?" Nancy asks.

"Yeah," Max answers.

"Larry's cool," Lucas says.

"Yeah," he and Nancy agrees. Max nods.

"Are you sad to leave?" Lucas tentatively asks.

"Yeah. I mean. I knew I had to go back. I wish... I wish I could be at two places at once. I want to be there but I also want to be in Hawkins with you guys. You guys aren't the worst."

"Thanks," they all chorus. "You too."

"But maybe like he said, maybe you could see him more from now on?" Lucas suggests.

"Yeah, maybe."

---

They stop at a small diner on the edge of Las Vegas for food.

"It's a shame the gambling age is 21. I would've cleaned them all out," Nancy says, looking out the window at the big casinos in the distance.

"Sure..." Max's answer is drawn out, skeptical.

"Oh you don't think I could? Wanna bet?" Competitive Nancy challenges.

"You wanna bet if you can bet?" Max throws back.

"Bet what, even?" Lucas wonders.

"Hm. I don't know. Point is, Vegas better watch out because in three years I'll be back and break the bank," Nancy says with confidence.

"I believe in you," he tells her.

"Of course you do," Lucas rolls his eyes at him.

"Thanks babe," Nancy smiles and gives him a peck on the cheek.

"Ugh," both Lucas and Max groans in turn. They ignore them.

"In any case, the most interesting stuff isn't here in Vegas, it's out there in the desert," Nancy continues and gives him a look. He nods. He knows what she's referring to, it's come up before when they've talked about... life. Plans. What they've been through. What they want to do.

"What?" Lucas asks.

"Area 51," Max fills in for them.

"Exactly," Nancy says and Lucas nods, he too has of course heard

stories about the mysterious place shrouded in secrecy. It's there but the government won't even admit it exists.

"Considering what they had at the Hawkins Lab, just imagine what kind of stuff they've gotten hidden out there in the desert in a place they won't even admit exists," Nancy speaks in a lowered voice now.

"Yeah. I didn't use to believe in any of that stuff before. But then I came to Hawkins and met you guys," Max says.

"The Lab can't have been the only place of its kind," he adds. Nancy nods.

"Don't go spreading this around," Nancy lowers her voice even further. Lucas and Max lean in. "But we plan on looking into stuff like it more. I mean, not Area 51 right now but. But with what we already know about the government being shady... we're gonna keep looking behind the curtain. We know some of what's out there. But not all. We want to know it all," she tells them and he nods with her for emphasis. Lucas and Max slowly nod in turn.

"That's cool," Max says.

"Is that why you're gonna study journalism?" Lucas asks.

"Yep. Or partly, at least. There's more to it than that but... I'm curious. I want to investigate. And tell the world. The shit they get away with in the dark, they shouldn't," Nancy answers.

"Awesome," Max nods.

---

They blow through Utah in the afternoon. "Pretty landscape" is Nancy's verdict. While Max ponders "How can you tell if someone is a mormon or not just by looking?" They cross the border into Colorado and find a cheap roadside motel for the night. They share a room all four of them to save money, which isn't the best, but they get a view of the Rocky Mountains to wake up to which isn't the worst.

Driving through Kansas isn't the most fun. Whole lot of nothing out the windows on both sides for a long time. It's quiet in the car, the others seem almost half-asleep. So he can't help himself.

"Hey Nance, which road should I take?" He asks her. She looks up confused, looks at the roadmaps in her lap and then back at the road.

"Huh, what? Just follow the interstate of course?" She's puzzled.

"Oh, okay. So I shouldn't follow the Yellow Brick Road?" He grins.

Lucas and Max audibly groan in the backseat. Nancy lightly smacks him on the arm.

"Dork."

"Hey Nance," he starts when they've just passed the border into Missouri.

"What?" She yawns back at him, tired. They need to find a motel for the night soon.

"I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore," he finishes.

"That's it. Just drop me off right here I'll just walk the rest of the way," Max dryly says while Lucas and Nancy just groan.

---

They roll back into Hawkins in the evening. They each called home earlier in the day to give a heads up. They go to drop off Max first. Her mother stands out on the lawn waiting for them when they pull up, her step-father on the porch. They all get out.

"Hey," is Max's short greeting. Her mother looks at her for a second, then steps forward and pulls her into a hug. Max is reluctant at first but then awkwardly hugs her back.

"Don't ever disappear on me like that again," Mrs. Hargrove says when she's released her daughter.

Max shrugs.

"Seriously."

"I wanted to see Dad."

"I know," Mrs. Hargrove sighs. "I understand that. Maybe you don't think I do, but I do."

Another shrug from Max. A new sigh from Mrs. Hargrove.

"Anyway. Larry and I have talked and... I've never kept you from seeing him, you know that. But I guess I could've been more understanding of how much you missed him. And I know it's not easy for him on his end to just fly out here so maybe I should've thought of that but... Anyway, we've talked and... well, we can talk more about it later but let's just say maybe we all can make more of an effort?"

"Sounds good," Max simply says.

"I've missed you," Mrs. Hargrove says next.

"I've missed you too," Max says quietly after a long pause.

Mrs. Hargrove then turns to them, first awkwardly patting Lucas on the shoulder.

"Thanks for looking after her, Jonathan, Nancy, and nice to really meet you" she says and shakes Nancy's hand and then his.

"No problem, our pleasure. And nice to meet you."

Mr. Hargrove has turned back into the house, Mrs. Hargrove turns to walk back inside too. Max turns to them.

"So uh, thanks again, for everything."

"Don't mention it."

"And tell me when you've done the math on the gas totals, like I said I'm no mooch."

"You bet," Nancy smiles and then pulls Max into a hug that she begrudgingly reciprocates.

"We should do this again, next time you drive, Zoomer," he jokes and quickly hugs Max too.

"Oh for sure," she grins.

"And hey, remember. Tell us if it gets too, y'know," he continues in a low voice, nodding back to her house. Nancy nods beside him.

"Yeah, I will," Max answers quietly.

"See you tomorrow," Lucas tells her after he's shared a considerably longer hug with Max.

"Yep," she smiles at him before taking her bag and turning to go inside.

"You're looking out for her too, right?" He asks Lucas in the car as they drive towards Maple Street.

"Yes. We don't spend any time at her place, we're either out or at my house, or either of yours really. And she can stay the whole day at my place. Mom says she's welcome any time."

"That's good."

As they pull up outside his house Lucas's whole family comes out to receive them.

"Run away like that again and you're grounded into the next century. Welcome home baby," Mrs. Sinclair says and pulls Lucas into a hug as soon as they've stepped out of the car.

"He's not grounded now?" Erica scoffs in disbelief.

"Thanks, mom."

Mrs. Sinclair pulls both Nancy and him into hugs next and in the meantime from the Wheeler house several people come over. Not only Karen, with Holly in tow, and Mike, but also his mom and Will.

"Can't believe you were able to sneak along," Mike shouts to Lucas, shaking his head.

"You better increase my stealth in DnD," Lucas grins back.

His mom and Mrs. Wheeler pulls both him and Nancy into hugs and soon ushers them all over to the Wheeler house for dinner, apparently Mrs. Wheeler called his mom after they've both called home today, and they planned this. The Sinclairs join them.

"We want to hear everything," Mrs. Wheeler says while leading everyone through her front door.

"I'll call Max over," Nancy whispers to him and Lucas and veers off to get to the phone.

Being on the road was nice, being in LA was nice, being back home is nice. Being anywhere with Nancy is nice. He really can't wait to be anywhere.